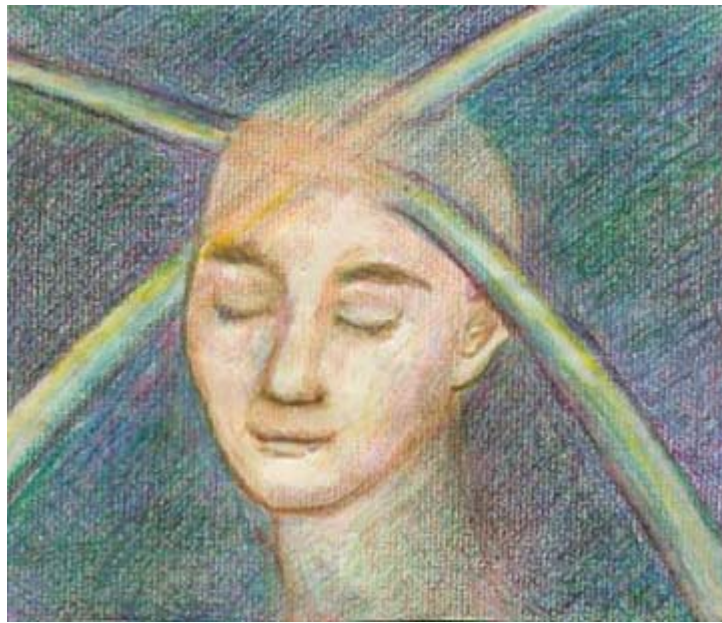


Coulter Faculty Center

Western Carolina University

Renaissance of Teaching and Learning



An Integration of Minds:

Bridging the Academic Divide between Self & Other

Sarah York, English Department

Booklet Five

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Western Carolina University student

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The Renaissance of Teaching & Learning Booklet Series is a publication of the Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning at Western Carolina University. The Series is intended to stimulate and support both scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching & learning by drawing contemplative attention to various aspects of the methods, goals and visions of teaching and creating learning opportunities with students.

Through their experience and wisdom about learning, the writers in the Series want to open a continuous dialogue among colleagues about the always ancient, always new profession of teaching. If the Series acts as a catalyst for a new renaissance of teaching & learning at WCU, it will be serving its purpose.

Alan Altany, Editor

Renaissance of Teaching & Learning Booklet Series
and Director, Coulter Faculty Center

An Integration of Minds: Bridging the Academic Divide between Self & Other

A short history and preface:

I started teaching the way many begin pregnancy: I was thrilled, alone, nauseous, and confused. I couldn't figure out the photocopier. I was looking forward to seeing eager new faces that were ready to learn. I didn't know anything about health insurance, and I had never heard of the Coulter Faculty Center. As a teaching assistant, I did not have the advantage of New Faculty Orientation. It was two short (yet seemingly long) years ago that I started teaching as a graduate student TA. In August 2003, I began teaching a full load as an adjunct, a visiting instructor. The opportunity was and is exhilarating, and the transitional period Western offers between assisting and teaching is well developed. Still, it was awkward and a bit embarrassing going through those special "changes" of being a new teacher.

Asking a young mother about pregnancy is like opening Pandora's Box. You will hear all about the first times, struggles, passions, and the feeling that there is and yet is not anyone else who can understand. Being a new teacher both in general and at Western in particular was a whole new world. I had come from a more traditional institution (University of Toronto) and a different understanding of the educational process. My professors at UofT were brilliant, but their classes were auditorium lectures averaging two hundred students per section. There were no one-on-one office hour sessions. Students were responsible for finding their way and did not interact with others during class. I had to learn everything over again when I studied pedagogy and apprenticed to teach here.

The following sections are short explorations of the big questions I faced and continue to face as a new teacher.

I. A Segregation of Minds

Riding the subways in my home city, a multicultural center, I took for granted that I was elbow-to-elbow with people from around the globe whom are able to live successfully together. Diversity binds people through sameness in difference; it is neither a melting pot nor mosaic, but a mellow symbiosis. My first college class offered a different perspective, however. Everyone was divided into fragmented chunks: “Today we will study *the* culture of disability, *the* Inuit community, *the* history of Arcadians in Quebec.” The minds of people are segregated it seems, with no commonality. Escaped Loyalists, slaves in the Underground Railroad, Japanese captives in internment camps, Jewish refugees denied asylum – nothing to be gained by understanding these persons as part of an integrated Canadian experience.

The rules of segregation are simple: we must be divided into affiliate groups, and we must never speak for one another. Tenured faculty should not represent the interests of adjuncts, and Caucasians who speak of the African-American experience are embarrassing; after all, we live in different dimensions, right? On the contrary, fostering segregation in the minds and hearts of categorized groups of people oversimplifies the human condition and fails to recognize individual worth. The new CEO Rosa, a divorcée, is outcast from the “old power” of the company, and Sam, the veteran living in social housing, is grouped with disadvantaged social activists, largely because he is Balinese. Segregated into affiliate groups thus, Rosa and Sam are already locked into “types” which determine how they are perceived and identified. Rosa will likely not ever be up for awards or special

projects, in spite of her talent, and Sam will never be invited to the select parties, despite his charm.

The segregation of one group from another occurs on all levels of the college experience: between students and teachers, among faculty and specialists, between faculty and administration. Often as not, these barriers are invisible, and we all try to work around them to create productive and affable relationships. Let each faction, department or level in the hierarchy do its bit, and we can all work together to get things done. This unspoken segregation is based on the reasoning that understanding needs context, that the whole is not a symbiosis of people but a sum of parts. Academia is so microscopically focused that it lacks the telescopic vision to see in wholes. If each “piece” is detached from the others, or fails to act responsibly, the whole fails. Parts do not a community make.

I was told as a new teacher that competition veiled as spirited challenge is fierce in the scholastic world: “don’t share your best ideas, hide your research until it’s published, and never expose your weakness.” My parents both taught at the university level, and yet I heard nothing of naturalism. Law of the Jungle was antithetical to everything I’d been taught about teaching, and yet it is the oldest truth in the world. There I was sharing my stumbles as a teacher – a socially acceptable way, I thought, to share the teaching experience - and I felt the fool. How did that make *me* look as a professional next to *them*?

Teachers care about both their students and their departments, and yet there is always the peripheral divide between “us” and “them.” Of course boundaries need to exist, and teachers and students have different roles to play. However, the attitude that we are segregated into invisible districts, of “I just

don't get how students think" or "keep to your tenure tracks, I'll keep to my adjuncts" propagates an opposite-side-of-the-tracks mentality. As a result, both teachers and students define themselves in the processes of learning and decision-making as "self" and "other" rather than as a functional "we."

When I first started teaching at Western, I was new to both the institution and to teaching in general. I was still a graduate student then, and I was exceedingly eager to teach and yet terrified of flopping. I was about to enter Morgan Freeman's role in *Lean on Me*. I would employ all the theory I had learned to create a challenging, supportive, and student-centered learning experience, mix it with trial-and-error, and *voilà!*: a cocktail for all to enjoy. I would move mountains with my teaching formula. The students would open up, we as a class would work to understand each other, and together we would try, fall down, laugh, yell, and leave as a kind of loosely bound family. It was cheesy and naïve. Over time I learned from students instead. The clues revealed themselves one at a time, and I realized experience really *is* the best teacher.

Achieving an *integration* of minds is a far greater challenge than I could predict. Imagine my devastation when after two years of effort, struggle, and examination, I was little further along in my plan. I discovered that informed and inspirational teachers were the norm. Great teachers I'd observed appeared to sit back and enjoy their classes, and I knew it couldn't be that simple. I love to teach, so I thought that I must work extra hard, drawing from all directions for guidance and wisdom. As an adjunct, I am both invisible and replaceable, which means that by extension my students are too. I try my very best to meet individual student needs, to assess my practice fairly, and to find a balance that works for the majority. Like many of my fellow instructors, I work overtime hours with machine-like regularity, and that is the

problem. When one works with the constancy of an automaton, the passion, dynamic, and other sacred elements of teaching and learning are lost. It is almost cliché.

To achieve an integration of minds one must release the need for control. I got so caught up in trying to teach from a “we”-based ideology, that, paradoxically, I was constantly defining and assessing both myself and my students. The more I helped my students, the more they depended on me for every aspect of their work, and the more in turn I increasingly divided myself and my knowledge from that of the students. I worked hard to create a free exchange in the class and to get students to actively engage. So when my 8 a.m. class turned up quiet, or a hungover student wandered in at the end, or a lesson I thought was the very fire of inspiration turned up nothing but blank stares, I thought: *why isn't the magic happening?!* It wasn't happening because I was burning bridges between myself and my students, by trying so hard to build them.

An example is when Dr. Terry Neinhuis (English) dropped in to observe. I assumed he was there to assess my teaching, as we shared a learning community. I was proud of the formalistic lesson I'd prepared: sound activities, flowing plan, good feedback, clarification and context, hands-on work, etc. When it was over, I asked him what he thought of the lesson and what I could improve. I was so eager to hear how my students were learning in the eyes of a senior colleague, that I failed to see the undercurrent of my questioning: *me*. It was not the student-centered mantra I had preached as a TA. Dr. Neinhuis kindly pointed out that the students appeared to be engaged and learning well. Yet I could see something was missing.

Graciously, Terry returned to a class I had not prepared. We all sat in a circle casually sharing student work. We discussed

new devices, and explored both successful passages and ones that needed revision. I thought it was very average. The students were proud and happy, and I had nothing to do with it. The class was paced by the students themselves. Terry sensed the electric potential of the class. He was moved enough to share a deeply personal story. He said to me, "I knew I had to come back. I knew it could be so much better. I'm glad I did." He thanked me and asked to come back again. I was shocked. We as a class were moving in concert, and I as a teacher let go of trying, and that is all it took to have a great learning experience.

The unspoken divide had been bridged by a sense of community, a feeling of synthesis. Tolerance for other's work had been replaced by recognition: mutual respect and appreciation. It was an integration of minds. I wondered if this would work among faculty as well: to cease imposing our desires on others, to demand less of ourselves, and to have fun interacting. Common ground is fertile for integration.

I learned that my "Invisible Man" complex as a teacher had turned out to be a good thing. My constant "background" presence – as opposed to a foreground command – taught me that an integration of minds means not being invisible, but teaching invisibly.

II. Invisible Teaching

"If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind."

(Gibran, Kahlil. *The Prophet*. New York: Knopf, 1943: 62.)

Every discipline has one advantage in common: it is based on a close examination and a deeper understanding of ourselves and our world. In the humanities, arts, and sciences we are fortunate enough to study the human condition for a living. It is little

surprise then that teachers are often empathic, insightful, perceptive, and caring people. Good teaching requires that one is both attentive and attuned; it is based in private inspiration, genuine care for students and love of profession, in outside class hours, in ethical decisions – in short, good teaching calls for invisible choices.

Invisible teaching refers to everything good teachers do to help students learn, adjust, and make sense of the world. It includes all the hours spent helping individual students understand something better, encouraging them to puzzle it out for themselves with support, helping them find the right resources. It includes all the moral decisions teachers wrestle with, all the important counseling and encouragement, all the hours spent really listening to a student who comes in tears because her life is a wreck. Students can tell whether you are really invested and interested in what they have to say and who they are, or whether you are simply going through the motion; often we can tell the same about our students.

Teachers are a bridge between students and the college experience in so many ways, that our job is never about punch-card hours. Most of what we do is invisible and yet we are evaluated based on the visible alone. Learning outcomes, teaching performance, assessments, isolated class visits, publications, and other tangible or directly observed phenomena form the basis of teacher assessment. Yet as my repeat visits from Terry show, the best parts of teaching are developed over time and are often unpredictable. A good class has as much to do with invisible factors such as balance in the lives of the students, a good feeling in the air, and a slight turn in the weather as it does with class prep and material. The invisibles affect whether or not students are comfortable enough to talk, feeling open and receptive, and energized enough to contribute.

Teaching is indeed an act of faith. Hitting a stride as a teacher is magical, but the satisfaction of a job well done is seldom visible. We must trust that things are working out, which tests our patience and self-esteem. Often we cannot tell whether or not we have truly made a difference, or how well our students are learning. I was once told that the extra time and effort we make with students can take root years down the line. The students themselves may not even realize what has happened, or how they learned, and will probably never attribute such changes to good teachers. That's the way it should be. If we are teaching invisibly, we are leading students into "the threshold" of their own minds and they leave with a valid and true sense that they are the ones who both taught and learned.

III. The Vision of One

"For the vision of one man lends not its wings to another man"
(*The Prophet* 62).

"No man can reveal to you aught but that which lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge" (*The Prophet* 62).

Learning from students was a shift for me: it is far more difficult to facilitate learning than to "traditionally" teach. As a graduate student, I was eager not only to share my mastered knowledge, but to teach improved systems and methods of understanding the discipline that I'd developed over the years. The shift to student-focused learning required giving up my own vision. As I described earlier, my sentimental daydream of teaching was shattered early on. I quickly deduced, however, that as teachers we can and must take advantage of our job. Learning from students and vicariously experiencing their learning process is deeply rewarding. Shepherding, refereeing, or guiding students

like a *sherpa* through their minds, is not as joyful a way to teach as giving students control. By observing students in the act of learning, one can still shape the educational process through continued response to student efforts and progress. I always remember my Montessori class as a student because everything was an actual rather than a hypothetical experience.

We all teach and learn individually, and with unique style. An obvious benefit of difference is learning from one another. As a new instructor, I hoped to create a working vision: What is my purpose? What do I hope to accomplish? How do students learn best? With a clear vision, I could tap into my special talents as a teacher, my experience as a learner, and the wisdom to both identify and incorporate differences in my students. I did not know the ten percent rules: no matter what you do, ten percent of students will fail the class, and up to ten percent will dislike you. I was sure that if I could attune myself to the students and turn them on to each other, that we could all work hard and accomplish great things. We experimented, failed, and succeeded, but ultimately my expectations got the better of me.

By expecting too much - and then not enough - of my students, I fell every bit as hard as they did in the effort to do well. I was open about my lack of experience, but provided a professional example. One day I realized that I had worked overtime several days in an effort to make up for what my students had failed, under strong guidance, to do. I decided for the students that they were going to work hard.

Imposing one's visions on others prohibits proper learning. A vision that works for everyone is one that affords students a way to release their own visions. Some students will naturally disagree with a teacher, because of a conflict of interest, a character clash, or a difference in ideological approaches to the material.

Inevitably there will be one or two contrary or “lost” students in every class who deserve equal treatment and perhaps a continued investment. There are also students who need intensive tutoring, and perhaps a gifted few who show facility in the subject matter. By trying to meet the individual needs and wants of each of my eighty-plus students each semester, I was not allowing anyone to grow. Perhaps the most difficult lesson I learned as a new teacher was to keep my vision out of the classroom. Many of the students on whom I had focused extra energy wanted neither the extra help nor chances. Some students wanted the kind of favoritism I was unwilling to provide, and others produced no effort at all.

The bottom line is that there *is* no collective vision, even when goals are defined as a group and collaboration is at the heart of the course. I found that hard to swallow. The visions don’t matter, what matters is the methods we use to identify, engage, challenge, and actualize them. If the visions of teachers and students can be pooled, we should dip into that pool regularly, but free of care.

IV. I Shot the Sheriff

During my stint as a TA, I encountered some intra-institutional conflict and was told (after much consultation) to handle the problems myself. There are always instances in which we must stand up for ourselves or someone else. Responsibility, accountability and discipline are important issues that new teachers face, because we are personally unknown, we have little or no relevant history to draw from, and we don’t want to disrupt the order of things. It is embarrassing to have any problems at all. I have known new teachers who are so fearful of being perceived as inadequate that they will drive eight hours with the flu from a flooded house rather than miss a class.

When ethics, professionalism, integrity, or fairness is in question, it is hard to know when to step in as a new faculty member, colleague, or friend. The problem may be plagiarism and you are referring back to the policy handbook, or that a colleague has been inappropriate in some way, or that one student has threatened another during your class period. Knowing your boundaries, responsibilities, and obligations as a new teacher can be complicated and stressful. There are always resources available to help you and talking to people may or may not set you at ease. It is important not to be treated as powerless, invisible, or irrelevant just because you are new, but it is also imperative to assess the situation carefully.

Coming from a large institution and a larger city, I was not used to the idea that the private self and the public self are the same thing. Small town living affords the comfort to mess up openly, and the support to recover quickly. One of the hardest things to say as a new teacher is, "I goofed up." Admitting your mistakes or weaknesses in a new environment takes courage, yet you don't have to feel defeated by sharing your mistakes.

V. Get a Life

Students like for teachers to contextualize class material within the "real world" and want help transitioning to jobs in the "real world."

As one who has held jobs as a waitress, an independent publisher, an administrative assistant, and other "real world" positions, I assure my students that this *is* the real world. College *is* a real job, not a preparation for meaningful employment. The misconception that college is not part of real life contributes to a sense of duality in teachers and students alike. There is our "school life" that includes all of our committees, classes, and work

related to research, teaching, and pedagogy. Social events or meetings involving any faculty member that is not a personal friend is also part of school life. By contrast, at five or six p.m. when we doff our robes and throw down our pens, we begin our “real lives.” The fractured living created by these two roles, “school me” and “real me” is not a necessary evil; it is often a strain because we take our work home.

As a “real” teacher (a non-TA), I took so much work home in an effort to establish myself as a competent and dedicated teacher, that I had *no* life of any kind. The morning after an all-night grading binge, I’d smile brightly and tell my students that their work should be interesting to them, that their passions are important and meaningful, and that all life outside of school – past experiences, relationships, and ideas – are relevant inside the classroom. Sometimes I was able to provide an example by drawing from a variety of my own internal sources: personal history, *savoir faire*, anecdotes, interdisciplinary education, and sound knowledge of popular culture. Other times, I fell flat. I was tired and overworked, scraping by financially, and had lost touch with the world. My students noticed, and I realized it was time to stop being so serious and step out a little.

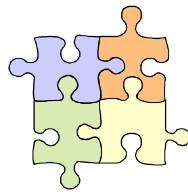
Passion is inspired by living, and it makes sense to extend this practice in the classroom. Our own interest becomes infectious. When we are in good health and balance our time wisely, we teach and learn constructively: curious, alert, and questioning. When we are run down, stifled by long working hours and draining commitments, we are reduced to the motions of getting the job done. Although teaching and learning is a natural part of life, it can feel unnatural under pressure. Giving up control and letting go of stress is important.

New faculty members often have no social life because they are in a new place and are out of the loop. It takes more than the University Club to make friends. New faculty are often simultaneously moving into a new house, relocating a family, adjusting to a new job, and learning a new set of rules. Meanwhile, they are working too hard. Extra energy is required for making first impressions, being observed, making new collegial introductions and speeches. It is relieving when one is reminded to drop the work and do only what is necessary. Put the responsibility back in the hands of students, and care for yourself that you might care for others.

Believe me when I say that cultivating personal interests and being a little selfish (and self-indulgent) is actually good for teaching, because “school life” and “real life” are one and the same (The CFC Summer Institute is a good place to practice blending). Go out for cocktails, dress up, see a play or an art exhibit, a symphony, or the local bluegrass concert. Go for a good hike and a skinny dip on the Blue Ridge Parkway. Paint and speak French in your pajamas — whatever. Share your inspirations in class.

I strive to live what I teach and to do so well. As a Composition instructor, I must write and research with regular zeal. I hold that a liberal education includes more than professional training, so I must be both professional and spirited. I also play with SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching & Learning): examining outcomes, experimenting with alternatives, and reworking how, what, and why I teach. I learn from others continually, borrow from their toolkits, and always ask questions. I refocus my courses to center on learning and student-based practice. Nevertheless, I must balance this enthusiasm and care with tempered experience.

In order to remain fresh, current, and interested, we must free ourselves to engage in the inspirations of life, to find new focus, and to muck around. If we cannot apply what we learn and do to broader contexts both naturally and openly, there is little chance our students will be motivated to do the same. As a student of all life, therefore, I remain yours truly.



Connecting

Please feel free to contact me, go out for coffee (or whatever), chat, or visit one of my classes. I'd love to come to one of your classes too – very casually, mind you – and learn. I am grateful to work with all of you. A warm welcome to each new faculty member at WCU: I look forward to meeting you. Adjusting to new surroundings, a new home, and a new institution can be both challenging and stressful. Please ask us questions and for help whenever you need it.

We all need guidance, friendship, encouragement, and support. I trust that you will find those things among your colleagues, and hope that you can find all the resources you need. If you want to vent, discuss teaching, bounce ideas, etc, my number is #3974, or email syork@wcu.edu. There are many diverse individuals here much more interesting and experienced than myself – give them a call too!

Bioessay by Sarah Kathryn York

Much of my biography, of course, has yet to be written. I recently employed biography as a class theme, and so I am humbled by a refreshed awareness of the richness of the lives around me.

I was born in Canada with the mixed blessing of academic and charismatic parents (one of whom we lost, both of whom are



American) and many siblings. I am decidedly a person who wants to learn and explore ideas professionally. As a child I heard that adventuring could be a career, and I want to adventure in my head, in the world, and with others for as long as I can. Eventually, the desire to learn led me to some alternative schools and special programs, in which, as a child of the seventies, I was fortunate to participate. I studied English Literature at

the University of Toronto and came to lovely Western Carolina for graduate studies. My thesis was in Romantic and Modernist works, specifically Keats, Faulkner, and Joyce. I dabble on the side in indie publishing with Charles White in the genre of sea fiction, and as the muse calls (with greater frequency and force than ever before), I write fiction of my own.

Thank you for your time. What I have written in this booklet is only a start, but the middle path is best I suppose. I have promised myself that I will not talk further about teaching and learning, so that I might listen to you.